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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: THE COMMUNISTS WORRY ABOUT THE MAOISTS

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: West Bengal's governing Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM) is concerned about the nascent spread of ultra-Left Maoist influence in rural West Bengal. The Party would prefer to tackle the Maoist challenge politically, by mobilizing the rural masses, but has not yet been able to develop programs or leaders who can successfully accomplish this. Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee favors the iron fist over the velvet glove and is pressing the state government to take a hard line. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) Deliberations during the triennial State Conference of the CPM, which concluded on February 12 in Calcutta, indicate that the Party is taking the Maoist threat seriously. Since the September 2004 merger between the two largest ultra-Left "Naxalite" groups, the People's War and the Maoist Communist Center, the resulting CPI(Maoist) has been engaged in mass contact programs in their strongholds in West Bengal (the districts of West Midnapore, Purulia, Bankura, Nadia). This has involved distributing political literature, organizing small gatherings and taking up local issues with the administration through front organizations. This has reached a scale where it is beginning to raise serious concerns within West Bengal's governing party.

13. (SBU) According to a ConGen contact, two political trends are worrying the CPM leadership. First, the rural areas had been the traditional strongholds of the CPM due to their local organization, their control of the Panchayat (local government) system, and their record - now two decades old - of land redistribution. In the most recent elections the CPM had begun to develop urban support for the first time, but the Party is concerned that, at the same time, it may be losing its grip in the countryside. According to this view, the benefits the CPM delivered are too far in the past to earn the Party credit, while the reality of the present is a local organization that it too often autocratic and corrupt. The Maoists, through their mass contact programs, are fast moving into the rural political spaces vacated by the CPM. The second concern our contact mentioned was the declining political fortunes of the CPM's traditional political rivals in the state - the Congress and Trinamul parties. The CPM fears that the Maoists are starting to assume the main opposition role in some places and may prove more formidable opponents. Reports from the rural areas indicate some political workers from the Trinamul and even some disgruntled CPM cadre have begun joining Maoist organizations.

14. (SBU) Some in the Party would prefer to engage the Maoists in negotiations while seeking to strengthen the CPM's rural leadership and deliver more benefits to the countryside. As the Bengali Nobel-Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen has amply documented, the CPM record on delivering health and education to the rural countryside has been abysmal in some areas of West Bengal, leaving ample scope for improvement in service delivery. However, West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, who himself has been on the Naxalites' hit list, is advocating a hard-line against the emerging Maoist threat. Citing the recent experience in Andhra Pradesh, he argues that talks have not been successful in the past when the Maoists simply used the negotiating phase to regroup. By contrast the Congress Party, running the UPA government in New Delhi, appears to favor negotiations. So far, West Bengal has been adhering to its Chief Minister's hard line and has been arresting CPI(Maoist) activists, even though the organization is not legally banned in the state. Bhattacharjee has expressed frustration that when the Naxalites engage in terrorist activity (as opposed to their political work) they usually attack from neighboring Jharkhand and then return to safehavens out of reach of the West Bengal police. His concern has now spread to northern West Bengal where he has requisitioned additional security forces from the Central government to combat the Nepalese Maoists. The West Bengal police had earlier detained some Nepalese Maoist leaders in Siliguri, and there is a fear that more might spill over into West Bengal following the King's assumption of power in Nepal.

15. (SBU) COMMENT: The CPM concerns appear well-founded, even if they still represent more of a potential future threat than an actual present danger. Congress and the Trinamul's diminishing influence has given the Maoists an opportunity, and through their mass contact programs they are beginning to fill this void. It is not clear whether the Chief Minister's decision to adopt a hard line against the Maoists will work or not. So far,

the Maoists are confined to a few districts in West Bengal.  
They could pose a serious political challenge to the CPM if they  
spread all across the state. END COMMENT.

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